

PARENTS AND CHILDREN.

A SEQUEL TO "HOME EDUCATION."

BY THE EDITOR.

IV.—PARENTS AS INSPIRERS. SECOND PART.

Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.—*Thackeray*.

Our last paper (November number) closed with an imperfect summary of what we may call the educational functions of parents. We found that it rests with the parents of the child to settle for the future man his ways of thinking, behaving, feeling, acting; his disposition, his particular talent; the manner of things upon which his thoughts shall run. Who shall fix limitations to the power of parents? The destiny of the child is ruled by his parents, because they have the virgin soil all to themselves. The first sowing must be at their hands, or at the hands of such as they choose to depute.

What do they sow? *Ideas*. We cannot too soon recognise what is the sole educational instrument we have to work with, and how this one instrument is to be handled. But how radically wrong is all our thought upon education! We cannot use the fit words because we do not think the right thing. For example, an *idea* is not an "instrument," but an agent; is not to be "handled," but, shall we say, set in motion? We have perhaps got over the educational misconception of the *tabula rasa*. No one now looks on the child's white soul as a tablet prepared for the exercise of the educator's supreme art. But the conception which has succeeded this time-honoured heresy rests on the same false bases of the august office and the infallible wisdom of the educator. Here it is in its cruder form: "Pestalozzi aimed more at harmoniously developing the faculties than at making use of them for the acquirement of knowledge; he sought to prepare the vase rather than to fill

it." In the hands of Froebel the figure gains in boldness and beauty; it is no longer a mere vase to be shaped under the potter's fingers; but a flower, say, a perfect rose, to be delicately and consciously and methodically moulded, petal by petal, curve and curl; for the perfume and living glory of the flower, why these will come; do you your part and mould the several petals; wait, too, upon sunshine and shower, give space and place for your blossom to expand. And so we go to work with a touch to "imagination" here, and to "judgment" there; now to the "perceptive faculties," now to the "conceptive;" in this, aiming at the moral, and in this, at the intellectual nature of the child; touching into being, petal by petal, the flower of a perfect life under the genial influences of sunny looks and happy moods. This reading of the meaning of education and of the work of the educator is very fascinating, and it calls forth singular zeal and self-devotion on the part of those gardeners whose plants are the children. Perhaps, indeed, this of the Kindergarten is the one vital conception of education that we have.

But in these days of revolutionary thought, when, all along the line—in geology and anthropology, chemistry, philology, and biology—science is changing front, it is necessary that we should reconsider our conception of education. We are taught, for example, that "heredity" is by no means the simple and direct transmission, from parent, or remoter ancestor, to child of power and proclivity, virtue and defect; and we breathe freer, because we had begun to suspect that if this were so, it would mean to most of us an inheritance of exaggerated defects; imbecility, insanity, congenital disease—are they utterly removed from any one of us? So of education, we begin to ask, Is its work so purely formative as we thought? Is it directly formative at all? How much is there in this pleasing and easy doctrine that the drawing forth and strengthening and directing of the several "faculties" is education? Parents are very jealous over the individuality of their children; they mistrust the tendency to develop all on the same plan; and this instinctive jealousy is right; for, supposing that education really did consist in systematised efforts to draw out every power that is in us, why, we should all develop on the same lines, be as like as "two peas," and (should we not?) die of weariness of one another! Some of us have an uneasy sense that things are

tending towards this deadly sameness. But, indeed, the fear is groundless. We may believe that the personality, the individuality of each of us is too dear to God, and too necessary to a complete humanity, to be left at the mercy of empirics. We are absolutely safe, and the tenderest child is fortified against a battering-ram of educational forces.

The problem of education is more complex than it seems at first sight, and well for us and the world that it is so. "Education is a life;" you may stunt and starve and kill, or you may cherish and sustain; but the beating of the heart, the movement of the lungs, and the development of the faculties (are there any "faculties"?) are only indirectly our care. The poverty of our thought on the subject of education is shown by the fact that we have no word which at all implies the sustaining of a *life*: education (*e*, out, and *ducere*, to lead, to draw), is very inadequate; it covers no more than those occasional gymnastics of the mind which correspond with those by which the limbs are trained: training (*trahere*) is almost synonymous, and upon these two words rests the misconception that the development and the exercise of the "faculties" is the object of education (we must needs use the word for want of a better). Our homely Saxon "bringing up" is nearer the truth, perhaps because of its very vagueness; anyway, "up" implies an *aim*, and "bringing" an *effort*.

The happy phrase of Mr. Matthew Arnold—which we have appropriated as the motto of the *Parents' Review*—is, perhaps, the most complete and adequate definition of education we possess. It is a great thing to have said "Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life;" and our wiser posterity may see in that "profound and exquisite remark" the fruition of a lifetime of critical effort. Observe how it covers the question from the three conceivable points of view. Subjectively, in the child, education is a life; objectively, as affecting the child, education is a discipline; relatively, if we may introduce a third term, as regards the environment of the child, education is an atmosphere.

We shall examine each of these postulates later; at present we shall attempt no more than to clear the ground a little with a view to the subject of this paper, "Parents as Inspirers"—not "modellers," but "inspirers."

It is only as we recognise our limitations that our work

becomes effective: when we see definitely what we are to do, what we can do, and what we cannot do, we set to work with confidence and courage; we have an end in view, and we make our way intelligently towards that end, and a *way to an end* is *method*. It rests with parents not only to give their children birth into the life of intelligence and moral power, but to sustain the higher life which they have borne. Now that life, which we call education, receives only one kind of sustenance; it grows upon *ideas*. You may go through years of so-called "education" without getting a single vital idea; and that is why many a well-fed body carries about a feeble, starved intelligence, and no society for the prevention of cruelty to children cries shame on the parents. Only the other day we heard of a girl of fifteen who had spent two years at a school without taking part in a single lesson, and this by the express desire of her mother, who wished all her time and all her pains to be given to "fancy needlework." This, no doubt, is a survival (not of the fittest), but it is possible to pass even the Universities' Local Examinations with credit without ever having experienced that vital stir which marks the inception of an idea; and, if we have succeeded in escaping this disturbing influence, why, we have "finished our education" when we leave school; we shut up our books and our minds, and remain pigmies in the dark forest of our own dim world of thought and feeling.

What is an Idea? A live thing of the mind, according to the older philosophers, from Plato to Bacon, from Bacon to Coleridge. We say of an idea, that it strikes us, impresses us, seizes us, takes possession of us, rules us; and our common speech is, as usual, truer to fact than the conscious thought which it expresses. We do not in the least exaggerate in ascribing this sort of action and power to an idea. We form an *ideal*—a, so to speak, embodied idea—and our ideal exercises the very strongest formative influence upon us. Why do you devote yourself to this pursuit, that cause? "Because twenty years ago such and such an idea struck me," is the sort of history which might be given of every purposeful life—every life devoted to the working out of an idea. Now is it not marvellous that, recognising as we do the potency of an idea, both the word and the conception it covers enter so little into our thought of education?

Coleridge brings the conception of an "Idea" within the sphere of the scientific thought of to-day; not as that thought is

expressed in *Psychology*—a term which he himself launched upon the world with an apology for it as an *insolens verbum*,* but in that science of the correlation and interaction of mind and brain, which is at present rather clumsily expressed in such terms as “mental physiology” and “psycho-physiology.”

Here, he gives us an illustration of the rise and progress of an idea:—

“We can recall no incident of human history that impresses the imagination more deeply than the moment when Columbus, on an unknown ocean, first perceived that startling fact, the change of the magnetic needle. How many such instances occur in history, when the ideas of nature (presented to chosen minds by a Higher Power than Nature herself) suddenly unfold, as it were, in prophetic succession, systematic views destined to produce the most important revolutions in the state of man! The clear spirit of Columbus was doubtless eminently *methodical*. He saw distinctly that great leading *Idea* which authorised the poor pilot to become ‘a promiser of kingdoms.’”

Notice the genesis of such Ideas—“presented to chosen minds by a Higher Power than Nature;” notice how accurately this history of an idea fits in with what we know of the history of great inventions and discoveries, with that of the *ideas* which rule our own lives; and how well does it correspond with that key to the origin of “practical” ideas which we find elsewhere:—

“Doth the plowman plow continually to . . . open and break the clods of his ground? When he hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the vitches, and scatter the cummin, and put in the wheat in rows, and the barley in the appointed place, and the spelt in the border thereof? For his God doth instruct him aright, and doth teach him . . .

“Bread corn is ground; for he will not ever be threshing it. . . . This also cometh forth from the Lord of hosts, which is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.”

Ideas may invest, as an atmosphere, rather than strike, as a weapon. “The idea may exist in a clear, distinct, definite form, as that of a circle in the mind of a geometrician; or it may be a mere instinct, a vague appetency towards something, . . . like the impulse which fills the young poet’s eyes with tears, he

* “We beg pardon for the use of this *insolens verbum*, but it is one of which our language stands in great need.”

knows not why.” To excite this “appetency towards something”—towards things lovely, honest, and of good report, is the earliest and most important ministry of the educator. How shall these indefinite ideas which manifest themselves in appetency be imparted? They are not to be given of set purpose, nor taken at set times. They are held in that thought-environment which surrounds the child as an atmosphere, which he breathes as his breath of life; and this atmosphere in which the child inspires his unconscious ideas of right living emanates from his parents. Every look of gentleness and tone of reverence, every word of kindness and act of help, passes into the thought-environment, the very atmosphere which the child breathes; he does not think of these things, may never think of them, but all his life long they excite that “vague appetency towards something” out of which most of his actions spring. Oh, the wonderful and dreadful presence of the little child in the midst!

That he should take direction and inspiration from all the casual life about him, should make our poor words and ways the starting point from which, and in the direction of which, he develops—this is a thought to make the best of us hold our breath. There is no way of escape for parents; they must needs be as “inspirers” to their children, because about them hangs, as its atmosphere about a planet, the thought-environment of the child, from which he derives those enduring ideas which express themselves as a life-long “appetency” towards things sordid or things lovely, things earthly or divine.

Let us now hear Coleridge* on the subject of those *definite* ideas which are not inhaled, as air, but conveyed, as meat, to the mind:—

“From the first, or initiative idea, as from a seed, successive ideas germinate.”

“Events and images, the lively and spirit-stirring machinery of the external world, are like light, and air, and moisture to the seed of the mind, which would else rot and perish.”

“The paths in which we may pursue a methodical course are manifold, and at the head of each stands its peculiar and guiding idea.”

“Those ideas are as regularly subordinate in dignity as the

* Method.

paths to which they point are various and eccentric in direction. The world has suffered much, in modern times, from a subversion of the natural and necessary order of Science . . . from summoning reason and faith to the bar of that limited physical experience to which, by the true laws of method, they owe no obedience."

"Progress follows the path of the idea from which it sets out; requiring, however, a constant wakefulness of mind to keep it within the due limits of its course. Hence the orbits of thought, so to speak, must differ among themselves as the initiative ideas differ."

Have we not here the corollary to, and the explanation of, that law of unconscious cerebration which results in our "ways of thinking," which shapes our character, rules our destiny? Thoughtful minds consider that the new light which biology is throwing upon the laws of mind is bringing to the front once more the Platonic doctrine, that "An Idea is a distinguishable power, self-affirmed, and seen in its unity with the Eternal Essence."

The whole subject is profound, but as practical as it is profound. We absolutely must disabuse our minds of the theory that the functions of education are, in the main, gymnastic. In the early years of the child's life it makes, perhaps, little apparent difference whether his parents start with the notion that to educate is to fill a receptacle, inscribe a tablet, mould plastic matter, or, nourish a life; but in the end we shall find that only those *ideas* which have fed his life are taken into the being of the child; all the rest is thrown away, or worse, is like sawdust in the system, an impediment and an injury to the vital processes.

This is, perhaps, how the educational formula should run: Education is a life; that life is sustained on ideas; ideas are of spiritual origin; but,

"God has made us so,"

that we get them chiefly as we convey them to one another. The duty of parents is to sustain a child's inner life with ideas as they sustain his body with food. The child is an eclectic; he may choose this or that; therefore, in the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand, for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.

The child has affinities with evil as well as with good;

therefore, hedge him about from any chance lodgment of evil suggestion.

The initial idea begets subsequent ideas; therefore, take care that children get right primary ideas on the great relations and duties of life.

Every study, every line of thought, has its "guiding idea;" therefore the study of a child makes for living education, as it is quickened by the guiding idea which "stands at the head."

In a word, our much boasted "infallible reason"—is it not the involuntary thought which follows the initial idea upon necessary, logical lines? Given, the starting idea, and the conclusion may be predicated almost to a certainty. We get into the *way* of thinking such and such manner of thoughts, and of coming to such and such conclusions, ever further and further removed from the starting point, but on the same lines. There is structural adaptation in the brain tissue to the manner of thoughts we think—a plan and a way for them to run in. Thus we see how the destiny of a life is shaped in the nursery, by the reverent naming of the Divine Name; by the light scoff at holy things; by the thought of duty the little child gets who is made to finish conscientiously his little task; by the hardness of heart that comes to the child who hears the faults or sorrows of others spoken of lightly.